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## AN EXPLANATION OF ABOT VI. 3

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THIS passage in the Baraita קנין תורה, so familiar to us, is on closer examination beset with difficulties which some commentators have not failed to notice. It reads<sup>1</sup>:

‘He who learns from his fellow a single chapter, a single rule, a single verse, a single expression, or even a single letter, ought to pay him honour, for so we find with David, King of Israel, who learnt only two things (שלא למד מאחיתפל אלא שני דברים בלבד) from Ahitophel, and yet regarded him as his master, his guide, and his familiar friend, as it is said: But it was thou, a man, mine equal, my guide, and my familiar friend (Ps. 55. 14). Now, is it not an argument from minor to major? If David, the King of Israel, who learned only two things from Ahitophel, regarded him as his master, guide, and familiar friend, how much more ought one who learns from his fellow a chapter, rule, verse, expression, or even a single letter, to pay him honour?’

Now the chief difficulty in this Baraita, in the current version, is that the deducing of the duty of honouring one's fellow for the instruction of ‘even one letter’ from the premise of honouring for ‘two things’, is called a קל וחומר. As the text stands, it is really a חומר וקל! Equally puzzling is the special and peculiar stress put on ‘*only* two things’ (אֵלָא שְׁנֵי דְּבָרִים בְּלִבְדָּא).

The commentators felt this logical irregularity and incoherence, and tried in different ways to surmount the

<sup>1</sup> In the translation of the *Authorized Prayer Book*, p. 205.

obstacle.<sup>2</sup> The usual explanation that because David, though a king, honoured his subject Ahitophel for two teachings received at his hand, therefore an ordinary man should honour his fellow even for a single letter learned from him, is hardly satisfactory.<sup>3</sup> Too much has to be read into the argument as it now stands, which by the very nature of a קל וחומר ought to be obvious and self-evident.

A simple alteration in the text, which was reported to me years ago in the name of some Russian Lamdan, whose name I cannot recall, restores at once the logic of the whole passage. The original unvowelled text had שְׁנֵי דְּבָרִים בְּלִבָּר,<sup>4</sup> which in the course of time was misread שְׁנֵי דְּבָרִים. Thus David and Ahitophel merely conversed as familiar friends, and still David showed Ahitophel all respect; how much the more should this be the case when one actually does learn from another! Accordingly the Baraita originally read:

‘He who learns from his fellow a single chapter, a

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. the Spanish preacher R. Joseph Jaabez (15th cent.) פ' על וקהו שְׁנֵי המפרשים ז"ל בזה הפסוק, דבשלמא לפרק או להלכה a.l. מס' אבות אחת יש ק"ו אבל לדבור אחד או לאות אחת מה ענין ק"ו? His mystical answer fails of course to meet the case.

R. Hayyim of Walosin, in his Abct commentary רוח חיים, Wilna, 1858, remarks: מהק"ו מדוד שלא למד מאחיתופל רק שני דברים בלבד לכאורה אין למדין על אות אחת. We need not follow him in his Kabbalistic solution of the difficulty.

<sup>3</sup> See especially R. Samuel b. Isaac of Uçeda (16th cent.) in his well-known ועוד [צריך] להבין איך דריש ק"ו מדוד למי שלא a.l. מדרש שמואל למד אלא אות אחת . . . והמפרשים פירשו שבאשר נעריך ערכו של דוד היות צדיק וישר ומלך ישראל ואחיתופל רשע ועם כל זה היה נוהג בו כבוד כפי ערך זה יוצא לנו שהלומד מחברו שהוא שוה אליו ק"ו שצריך לנהוג בו כבוד אפי' על אות אחת, ואין דעתי נוחה מאלו הערכין וכ"ו.

<sup>4</sup> For this phrase, cf. Mal. 3. 16, וְאֵן נִדְּבָרוּ אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ; Mekilta Bo, beginning, ed. Friedmann, p. 2, (עם משה) עמו (הקב"ה) לא נִדְּבָר (חכב"ה) . . . אף על פי שְׁנֵי דְּבָר עמהם (עם הנביאים) בחו"ל תוך הכרך . . .

single rule, a single verse, a single expression, or even a single letter, ought to pay him honour, for so we find with David King of Israel, *who learnt nothing from Ahitophel but merely conversed with him* (שָׁלָא לְמַד מֵאַחִיתּוֹפֶל, אֲלָא שִׁנְדְּפִירִים) (בלבד), and yet regarded him as his master, his guide, and his familiar friend, as it is said: But it was thou, a man, mine equal, my guide, and my familiar friend (Ps. 55. 14). Now, is it not an argument from minor to major? If David, the King of Israel, *who learned nothing from Ahitophel, but merely conversed with him*, regarded him as his master, guide, and familiar friend, how much more ought one who does learn from his fellow a chapter, rule, verse, expression, or even a single letter, to pay him honour?'

Both the suggested original reading and its current form call for some comment:

(1) Ps. 55. 14, cited in the Baraita, is to be taken in connexion with the following verse (15): 'We took sweet counsel together', viz. conversed together as familiar friends.<sup>5</sup> This makes the inference in our Baraita evident. Also the emphatic בלבד after אֲלָא שִׁנְדְּפִירִים becomes now perfectly intelligible.

(2) The usual reading (שָׁנִי דְּבָרִים) is very old. It is of interest to note that it is older than Raba, who had the reading שָׁנִי דְּבָרִים. The Gemara to Kalla, c. viii, which is identical with Abot, c. vi. 3, remarks on the passage in question אֲלָא שְׁנֵי דְּבָרִים, מֵאִי נִינְהוּ? אָמַר רַבָּא וכו'. Thus, Raba, who flourished in the first half of the fourth century, goes on to determine what these two cases were wherein David obtained guidance from Ahitophel.

(3) Our Baraita is anonymous. The previous Agadah, Abot vi. 2, is by R. Joshua b. Levi. Though some texts

<sup>5</sup> Probably in our text the indication וכו' after וּמִדְּעֵי has fallen out.

read  $\overline{\text{כל}} \text{הלמר מחב'}$  (instead of  $\overline{\text{כל}} \text{הלמר}$ ), which implies that it is the continuation of this Rabbi's saying, it is very doubtful whether he is really its author. Thus Bacher (*Agada der Pal. Amoräer*, i. 137) rightly does not include it among the sayings of R. Joshua b. Levi. In Midrash Ps. c. 55 (ed. Buber, p. 146) there is indeed attributed to him an opinion that David called Ahitophel teacher.<sup>6</sup> But here too the authorship is problematic, as a comparison of the parallel texts shows (see Buber's note, no. 8).

(4) Moreover, the underlying Agadah as to the relations of David and Ahitophel seems to be of an early date. It is anterior to R. Yohanan (died 280 C.E.)—a contemporary of R. Joshua ben Levi—who amplifies it in Sanh. 106 b. Whereas our Baraita only mentions that David called Ahitophel master, guide, and acquaintance, R. Yohanan depicts three stages in their intercourse, during which the prestige of Ahitophel decreased, viz. first David regarded him as his master, then as his colleague, and finally as his disciple. This fact furnishes internal evidence for assuming that our Baraita is of an earlier date.

(5) The usual reading, which appears to have been the current one as far back as the days of Raba, throws a flashlight on the process of transmission of this Baraita. Whatever proofs may or may not be forthcoming that the canonical Mishna was tradited orally, this uncanonical ('extraneous') Mishna found its way from Palestine to Babylon in a written form. Only in a *written text* could a copyist misread  $\text{שְׁנֵי דְבָרִים}$  for  $\text{שְׁנֵי דְבָרִים}$ . One could hardly account for it in an oral transmission.

<sup>6</sup> מהו בערכי? אמר ר' יהושע בן לוי כסדרי שהוא מסדר את ההלכות, אלופי שהיה רבי ומלמדי תורה, דכתיב אשר יחדיו נמתיק סוד.